

# The Mirror House

By Hisanori Isomura

The 20th century has rightly been characterized as an era of war, revolution and growth. On the down side, there were far more war fatalities in the 20th century than in all the wars from the start of recorded history through the 19th century. On the up side, 90% of the scientific inventions known to man have been created within the last 30 years.

Yet as we approach the end of the 20th century, there are hopes that the end of the cold war will usher in a new century of peace and communication. And it is this communication that I want to focus on.

Even though "communication" is supposed to be a process whereby people gain a common perspective, there are still sharp differences in how Japan and the rest of the world see the same news. This is epitomized by perceptions of events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

Today, the Japanese media are all in a frenzy about the end of the cold war, the prospects for disarmament, and the transformation under way in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. But not too long ago, they were uninterested in developments in Eastern Europe or in *perestroika* in the Soviet Union.

The Euro-American media were much quicker to pick up on these trends and to recognize their importance. For example, *Le Figaro* listed the top news stories of 1988 as (i) the ethnic unrest in Armenia, (ii) the end of the Iran-Iraq war, (iii) Gorbachev's disarmament proposals, (iv) the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, and (v) *perestroika*.

What did the Japanese press rank as the top stories of 1988? The top six were the Recruit scandal, the tax reforms, the emperor's illness, the *Nadashio* accident in which one of the Maritime Self-Defense Force's submarines rammed a tourist fishing boat, the Seoul Olympics, and Bush's election as president. The contrast is striking.

Nor was this an isolated quirk. In 1989 the *Yomiuri* newspaper's top international stories were (i) the Tiananmen incident,



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(ii) the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, (iii) President Bush's inauguration, (iv) the San Francisco earthquake, and (v) the Malta summit.

Japan is said to be awash in information, but this is very different information from that in other countries.

## Separate histories

What accounts for this? The first factor, of course, is that Japan is geographically set apart from the rest of the world, located as it is in the nowhere land of East Asia. In Europe, where you can walk from one country to the next, not even the Berlin Wall was able to block the flow of information.

I remember visiting Czechoslovakia several years ago and being taken to see an attic room where people were watching Western television. In Poland, the people were spending close to \$600, or about six times the average monthly wage, to watch Western television.

Even in Romania under the Ceausescu dictatorship, the people of Timisoara would go climb nearby hills every weekend and watch Western television on their portable sets. And this is not just a

few people. At one point, there were tens of thousands of people out watching television, and even policemen joined in.

Where countries are neighbors as they are in Europe, radio and television are transnational and the people have ready access to a wide range of information. Unlike George Orwell's predictions in *1984*, television has developed not as an intrusive invasion of privacy by Big Brother but as a medium of freedom and information across the Iron Curtain.

The second factor accounting for the perception gap is the fact that Japan does not share the same historical heritage and does not have the blood ties that link Euro-Americans.

The recent NHK special on Romania is illustrative. This was a documentary put together from 8mm videotapes shot by two Romanians, and it showed the revolution there from the Romanian perspective. Yet when it came time to transcribe and translate the commentary on the sound portion of the tapes, NHK was unable to locate more than two people in all of Japan who understood Romanian. In the end, the tapes were sent to NHK's Paris bureau to be translated into French and then from French into Japanese.

In Europe, there would be tens and even hundreds of thousands who understand Romanian and have ties to Romania. There is an all-pervasive network of family ties linking the countries of Europe. A person might be French but born in Berlin to a Polish mother, and her husband might be a White Russian whose mother is part French and whose father is part Czech. Mixed lineage is the norm, not the exception.

The pattern also holds in the United States, and these blood ties create a sense of community and facilitate close communication among all of the Euro-American peoples. By contrast, Japan is outside of this personal network.

The third factor accounting for the perception gap is the different Japanese and Euro-American views of nationalism.

Charles de Gaulle once said that ideology is akin to the bubbles on the surface of the flow of history while ethnic traditions and nationalism provide the underlying current. To this way of thinking, the collapse of the Berlin Wall is proof that communism was unable to extinguish the flames of nationalism despite 40 years of indoctrination.

Although the Communist Manifesto proclaimed that, "The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got," and the Soviet Union was supposed to be a workers' international as workers of the world united, the reality was that the Soviet Union was a colonial empire with the Russian people dominating the other ethnic groups—and it is ethnic nationalism that is tearing the Soviet Union apart today.

Yet nationalism has been the exclusive realm of the right wing in postwar Japan, and there are even people who are embarrassed about flying the flag or singing the national anthem. Rejecting nationalism, postwar Japanese have aspired to be international.

There are innumerable companies and other organizations that call themselves *kokusai* or "international." There is the Kokusai Motors bus and taxi company, the Kokusai Country Club, the Kokusai This, and the Kokusai That. There are even a number of Kokusai Pachinko parlors. And the end result of this overuse has been to strip *kokusai* of all meaning.

When the news of the Berlin Wall's being breached reached the West German Parliament, the parliamentarians spontaneously broke out in Haydn's "Deutschland, Deutschland über alles." This is completely alien to contemporary Japanese thought processes.

Yet perhaps the main reason for the perception gap is the different views of religion. The European, and hence the American, tradition is one of Greco-Roman nationalism plus Renaissance enlightenment founded on Judeo-Christian civilization.

In Japan, however, religion is seen as a pastime for old people. The respected scholar Michio Nagai recently visited the Soviet Union and was invited by a Soviet

friend to go to church with him one Sunday. When he came back to Japan and told a media friend that the church was packed, the friend said, "But it was all old people, right?" Such is the Japanese assumption that religion is an indulgence for old people.

The December 1, 1989, history-making encounter between Gorbachev and the pope was a major story in Europe—even bigger than the Gorbachev-Bush summit in Malta. Since Pope John Paul II's election, the church has been a sanctuary in Eastern Europe and a major factor in the decade-long struggle for freedom in Poland.

The Roman Catholic church has played this role in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and the Protestant churches played the same role as a sanctuary in East Germany. In Romania it was the government's attempt to arrest the Reverend Laszlo Tokes that sparked the demonstrations leading to Ceausescu's overthrow. Likewise, the Islamic religion is a powerful force within the Soviet Union, and Islamic fundamentalism was one of the reasons the Soviet Union was so bloodied in Afghanistan.

Yet postwar Japanese have tended to overlook the very strong force of religion in world affairs, and this has also contributed to the perception gap between Japan and the Euro-American countries.

## Erroneous perceptions

However, Japanese perceptual deficiencies alone are not entirely to blame for the perception gap. There are also major flaws in Euro-American perceptions of Japan.

In the first place, there is the widespread Japanophobia epitomized by the revisionists who contend that Japan is somehow "different" and impossible to deal with by normal means. These people claim that Japan does not share free-trade values, and they also seem to be bothered by the fact that Japanese religion is not monotheistic worship of an omnipotent God but pantheistic reverence for a broad spectrum of gods.

The second problem is that, just as Japanese tend to see the changes in East-

ern Europe as a sudden mutation, Euro-Americans tend to see Japan's prosperity in the latter part of the 20th century as an aberration or fluke of history and Japanese as faceless workaholics who have prospered by toiling inhuman hours and disregarding all thought of cultural pleasures. More perceptive observers know that Japan's present prosperity has its roots in the system of universal education and the high literacy rate dating back to the Edo period (1603–1868), and that it is a mistake to ignore this and to simply point to Japan as a sudden threat that has come from nowhere to world prominence.

Finally, while Japanese believe that no other country is so anxious to be international and so concerned with being cosmopolitan, Euro-Americans see Japan as a homogeneous and very closed society and one of the most nationalistic countries in the world.

Underlying these perceptual differences about Japan is the biggest disparity of all: the Japanese are acutely aware of their own vulnerability and shortcomings, while foreign observers tend to attribute a near-invincibility to Japan. An amazing number of people have argued that European unification is the only way that Europe can beat back the Japanese challenge. Even people who are confident they will prevail fall prey to this misconception. The president of BMW, for example, recently commented that Japan is not invincible and that Japan will eventually fall just as Napoleon and Caesar fell. Japan side-by-side with Napoleon and Caesar? Coming from Japanese lips, that would be the height of arrogance.

Granted all of the perception gaps that exist between Japan and the Euro-American countries, I suspect this is the one that has to be righted first: the Euro-American tendency to overrate Japan and to see Japan as a threat. ■

(This is the first of five essays by Hisanori Isomura.)

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